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7 **THE LEGACIES OF *WRITING CULTURE* AND THE**  
8 **NEAR FUTURE OF THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FORM: A**  
9 **Sketch**  
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13 **University of California, Irvine**  
14

15 **TWO OPENING TABLEAUS . . .**

16 The writing culture “moment” really began for me with the arrival of a visitor  
17 to our department at Rice in 1980 (we were collectively discussing, I recall, orality  
18 and writing in the production of ethnography), with his (Harvard book) bag full of  
19 books . . . The visitor was James Clifford, and he presented an early version of his  
20 paper, “On Ethnographic Authority,” as he passed around valuables—exemplars  
21 (I recall most memorably, Jeanne Favret-Saada’s *Deadly Words* [1980])—of what  
22 was to become the reflexive turn of experiment and all of its variants in “writing  
23 culture.”

24 [What is the equivalent of such a bag of books in thinking about legacies of  
25 *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) today?]

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27  
28 An exchange of endorsements. . . . A particular kind of exchange of “The Gift”  
29 that defines and entwines scholarly careers:<sup>1</sup>

30 The “Late Editions” project (eight annuals, edited by me, and published by the  
31 University of Chicago Press, 1992–2000) was one major preoccupation of mine  
32 in the decade—which happened to be the fin de siècle—following the publication  
33 of *Writing Culture* and the subsequent debates that it stimulated. I understand this  
34 as a bridge project between the challenge to documentary representation raised  
35 by the *Writing Culture* critique and current experiments with forms alongside and

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2 within contemporary ethnographic process to be introduced in this retrospective  
3 sketch . . .

4 On the back of the first volume in the Late Editions series, *Perilous States:*  
5 *Conversations On Culture, Politics, and Nation*, 1993:

6  
7 Who better than George Marcus to steer the ghost-ship of anthropology, the  
8 perennially stimulating child of colonialism, into the mists of fin-de-siècle?  
9 Now anthropology-as-cultural-critique finds its true medium in a new world  
10 order of collapsed socialisms, wild capitalisms, planetary warlordism, and  
11 radical redefinition of female and male, white and colored. Combining the  
12 shock of ethnographic method with the nomadology of the guerrilla writer,  
13 this new and collective venture, neither book, nor journal, promises to be the  
14 format actively equal to this moment in history. —Michael Taussig

15 [wow, what has changed? As Taussig says, Late Editions was neither book nor  
16 journal. Then what? What sort of format? What sort of form? Equal to this moment  
17 of history? An always premature question then. It is less so now.]

18 In the same year of publication, 1993, I commented on the back cover of what  
19 has become one of Mick Taussig's most influential and enduring books, *Mimesis and*  
20 *Alterity: a Particular History of the Senses*:

21  
22 What is so strategic and crucial about this work is that it redeems mimesis  
23 from its association with naïve ideas about representation once dominant in the  
24 social sciences. In so doing, it creates a strong and very necessary challenge  
25 to the alternative idea that all of culture is constructed in discourse—the  
26 theoretical workhorse of the fashionable cultural studies movement that is now  
27 threatening to reach a level of saturation and predictability. Taussig's deeply  
28 informed anthropological readings present us with a contemporary cabinet  
29 of curiosities that informs the longstanding fascination with the primitive in  
30 the constitution of the modern, and shocks us, in the spirit of Benjamin, into  
31 reconsidering what we thought we had largely dismissed in our concerns with  
32 the politics of representation.

33 [In 1993, Taussig was using mimesis already to push beyond the fieldwork—  
34 ethnography complex—to evoke what could be written about but not represented]

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37 *Writing Culture* was an ambitious and much needed critique of anthropology by  
38 means of literary therapy applied to its primary genre form.<sup>2</sup> Issues of politics, the

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2 claims of anthropological knowledge, and what exactly is transacted in fieldwork all  
3 became matters of experiment with a rather modest textual form that became richly  
4 overburdened for a time, and then settled into new conventions that accommodated  
5 rhetorics of argument, “doing” theory, and a general so-called “reflexive turn.”  
6 This legacy of experimenting with forms has now shifted to and blended with  
7 contemporary challenges to constituting still mostly individualistic projects of  
8 ethnographic research in a more globally organized or, rather, arranged, world in  
9 which fieldwork must be constituted other than locally. Far from being matters  
10 of new method, about which anthropologists have been famously implicit and  
11 unspecific, these challenges are once again about the forms of knowledge but have  
12 now shifted from texts as reports from the field to the production of media (web  
13 texts, forms of collaborative thinking, articulations, concept work amid data, or  
14 as data) within, or alongside, the field, as the latter has changed its character  
15 (Faubion and Marcus 2009)—and modes of making them accessible to multiple  
16 constituencies, including the professional one. Although the latter trend might  
17 be seen as mainly a result of the spread of new information technologies—the  
18 vaunted digital revolution—it would be a mistake, without underestimating at  
19 all their significance, to miss the continuity of *Writing Culture*’s concerns with  
20 critique through experiments with (discursive) forms in the same impulses today  
21 to find ways, media, and modes that mesh ethnographic discourse itself within  
22 anthropology’s reinventions of fieldwork as a process of inquiry.

23 So, in this reidentification of the concerns of *Writing Culture* in the present, I  
24 want to identify two tendencies:

- 25  
26 1. There are shifts in the forms of scholarly communication or at least in  
27 the ecology of the present expansion of digital possibilities and how these  
28 are affecting the ethnographic genre of research and writing: the book  
29 remains important, of course, to ethnography, but in a different ecology  
30 which favors “commons” of various sorts. Chris Kely (2009) has written  
31 about this as the function of composition as a key form of ethnographic  
32 process based on its collaborative, collective grounds (drawn from the  
33 practices of crowd sourcing, open source and access, and the formation of  
34 recursive publics). What does the book or its related productions (e.g.,  
35 the scholarly article) out of the ethnographic process become within this  
36 ecology? Some of the exemplars of new forms that I will mention arise as  
37 a function of trying to situate ethnographic research today in this ecology  
38 and developing embedded, accessible expressions of it in process.

2 2. And to certain degrees, there has been an involution of form in the writing  
3 of ethnographic accounts, a certain settling in of theoretical influences  
4 as dictating writing practices—and leading to a mannerist, or even a  
5 baroque form (Marcus 2007). Notable ethnographic accounts are often  
6 marked by tendencies of excess in descriptive and theoretical ardor, and a  
7 desire to surprise by tropes of unusual juxtaposition. Less baroque forms  
8 of ethnography must find their richness, I argue, outside now established  
9 theoretical traditions of critical ethnographic writing, and the appeal of  
10 alternative forms of articulating thinking, ideas, and concepts inside or  
11 alongside the challenge of situating and managing the fieldwork process—  
12 in “third spaces,” archives, studios, labs, “para-sites” and the like—is just  
13 that.

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15 The discursive thinking produced in these forms along the way of fieldwork is not  
16 especially antitheoretical, or overly pragmatist, but foremost open and sensitive to  
17 found perspectives as sources of its own ideas, and its own language of commitment  
18 to argument or critique. The use of critical cultural theories from the 1980s and  
19 1990s is a means of creating an often-ancillary apparatus for a kind of found and  
20 direct concept work in designed spaces of experiment and intervention alongside  
21 the valued serendipity of fieldwork’s movements and circuits (these could be, e.g.,  
22 studios, installations, workshops, or simply seminars as, or lateral, to fieldwork).  
23 Most acutely, the ethnographic process becomes transitive and recursive, in addition  
24 to being already deeply reflexive. Writing culture within this process moves from  
25 the field notebook (in anticipation of the eventual text) to certain accessible, if not  
26 public, forms of concept work and critique in the protracted, phased segments of  
27 many fieldwork projects today. It is experiments and attempts at these kinds of  
28 forms that I have been especially interested to examine today as a legacy of 1980s  
29 writing culture debates in their displacement within the terrain of anthropological  
30 inquiry that is conventionally categorized as “method.”

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32 **THE 1990S, THE 2000S, AND THE CENTER FOR ETHNOGRAPHY AT**  
33 **UCI**

34 After the 1980s writing culture debates that put in play a paradigm of cri-  
35 tique for anthropological research—from, say, the early to mid-1990s onward—  
36 anthropology in the United States had then to rethink itself, as did a number of  
37 other disciplines, in relation to the perception and reality of macro social changes  
38 that went under the rubric of globalization. As a discipline, it had to work through

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2 knowledge economies, global projects of political economy, assemblages, or cir-  
3 culations to find its way to both its traditional and new subjects at the ethnographic  
4 scale (face-to-face, everyday) in which it is committed to work. This task was more  
5 than just recontextualizing or renarrating the scenes or locations where ethnogra-  
6 phy could be done. It meant literally moving in scapes or flows, reinventing the  
7 concept of the field, reproblematising the traditional object of study, and exploring  
8 new ones. This collective thinking was reflected at the time by a spate of resonant  
9 “trend” writing (in U.S. anthropology, works such as Appadurai 1996; Tsing 2000;  
10 Gupta and Ferguson 1997; and Marcus 1995, among several others) about the re-  
11 calibration of the scale and meaning of the basic tropes of anthropological research  
12 method so as to set them in motion.

13 The diverse and fascinating ways that the trends envisioned in the 1990s as the  
14 challenge of globalization to the previously more circumscribed ways of conceiving  
15 projects of ethnography have played out through the first decade of this century—  
16 and continuing—as problems of designing fieldwork and its practices in, through,  
17 and between complex institutional orders (e.g., Ong and Collier 2005 is, for me,  
18 an iconic text, among others like it, of the ethos of ethnographic research during  
19 this period). Conditions for ethnographic research glimpsed or evoked in the 1990s  
20 are now full throttle trends of research practice, to be examined as experimental  
21 moves or improvisations project by project, as they are reported in ethnographic  
22 writing still dominated by critical theory, as they are evoked in the shifting terms  
23 of “tales of the field”—the particular kind of shop talk in which anthropologists  
24 like to indulge about their tradecraft, as they are taught in graduate mentoring,  
25 and most importantly, as they are reflected in the alternative media and forms,  
26 notably collaborative, through which access to both fieldwork and its results in  
27 development is made available.

28 In broad brush, I am particularly interested in projects that have to work  
29 through complex knowledge economies to shape their own anthropologically con-  
30 ceived objects of study, projects in which the balance has shifted from previously  
31 marked epistemological interest in defining ethnographic research questions by the  
32 intense examination of anthropologist–other intersubjectivity to a marked onto-  
33 logical interest in the problem of conceiving complex objects of study (in this,  
34 anthropology’s participation in science studies has been crucial in conditioning it  
35 more generally to working through knowledge economies to sites of everyday life  
36 [see, esp., Fischer 2003, 2009]). And commensurately, the reflexive turn, instilled  
37 by 1980s critiques of ethnographic writing, has been overshadowed by a transitive  
38 (or alternatively, recursive) turn. Anthropologists move in circuits, assemblages, or

2 among relations—as working metaphors for defining the field—and they move sit-  
3 uated discourses that they accumulate around with them in unusual configurations.  
4 This movement and posing of arguments out of the places where they are usually  
5 made, heard, and reacted to, are distinctive acts of ethnographic fieldwork that are  
6 political, normative, and sometimes provocative in nature and deserve their own  
7 designed modalities accessible to readerships, audiences, and constituencies who  
8 consume ethnography as a form of knowledge. In this sense, indeed, ethnography  
9 has routinely become “circumstantially activist” (Marcus 1995), not so much as a  
10 contingent effect of the unfolding of research as multisited but, rather, as central to  
11 its strategies of asking and pursuing questions among its constituencies, including  
12 and encompassing, activists, social movements, jurists, humanitarian interventions,  
13 international organizations, and for that matter, corporations, agencies, and labs  
14 as well, but always in the name of a distinctive tradition and form of disciplinary  
15 knowledge.

16 The visions and tropes of the 90s have thus become plans, designs, and tech-  
17 nologies for giving form to fieldwork in the present. The classic ethnographic textual  
18 form—even as amended since the 1980s, and given its learned pleasures—is a very  
19 partial and increasingly inadequate means of composing the movements and contests  
20 of fieldwork—both naturalistic and contrived, collaborative and individualistic—  
21 that motivate it, and on which it is intended to report. The alternative are middle  
22 range forms of collaborative articulations in the course of inquiry that need, in turn,  
23 trials and experiment under the mantle of disciplinary recognition and authority  
24 that anthropology has to confer on the research that it engenders.

25 These developments are indeed underway, and my own vantage point to  
26 explore them is from within the Center for Ethnography that since its founding  
27 at the University of California, Irvine in 2005 ([www.ethnography.uci.edu](http://www.ethnography.uci.edu)) has  
28 been interested in studying the conditions of contemporary challenge to and en-  
29 hancement of common understandings in disciplines (not just anthropology) that  
30 promote and value ethnographic inquiry, say, for example, at the time of the 1980s  
31 *Writing Culture* critique, as well as before and after, in the unfolding of projects of  
32 ethnographic research, whether pursued as the initiatory pedagogical dissertation  
33 project or as successive later projects in maturing research careers.

34 The following are six conditions that shape ethnographic projects today and  
35 to which the Center has paid special attention. In my own view, such condi-  
36 tions are significant in encouraging experimentation with the discursive forms of  
37 collaborative thinking enmeshed within or alongside the pursuit of still largely  
38 individually conceived projects of fieldwork.

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**One: Most Prominently, the Imperative and Impulse to Collaborate**

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**Two: Double Agency**

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unfold.<sup>3</sup>

2 **Three: Reception and Granular Publics within the Frames of Field-**  
3 **work**

4 The widespread call, at least in U.S. anthropology, for a public anthropology  
5 signals the intense interest of anthropologists in the responses to their work by the  
6 publics (or commons) of varying composition and scale that it is able to touch. These  
7 responses seem to matter more to many anthropologists, at least affectively, than  
8 professional responses to their work. Some of the alternative forms in and alongside  
9 fieldwork that I am surveying accommodate this desire, and define challenges of  
10 design that address it. How can this interest in reception—as engagement with  
11 constituencies while the research is in progress as an integral dimension of it—  
12 become a granular dimension of the scale and process of a fieldwork project? This is  
13 not just a question of what the subjects think of what the anthropologist has written  
14 about them, but how diverse responses to a project as it develops become part of  
15 its integral data sets, and then the basis for professional reception and assessment  
16 of their own products of knowledge by anthropologists themselves in a double,  
17 dialogical process by which the results in progress of anthropological inquiry are  
18 both public and authoritative knowledge. Folding receptions into anthropological  
19 research through alternative forms, such as the studio, the para-site, or the dynamic  
20 archive, responds to, and “passes” for as well, a kind of operative imperative,  
21 like that to collaborate, in neoliberal institutional arrangements and projects,  
22 to provide voice for “stakeholders.” But in the studio or para-site contexts of  
23 ethnography, this accommodation of reception in research agendas themselves plays  
24 into anthropology’s own longer-standing critical rationales and commitments. All  
25 of the forms that I evoke below explicitly define publics or constituencies as a  
26 dimension of fieldwork itself.

27  
28 **Four: Incompleteness and Scale**

29 Ethnographies never have delivered literal holistic accounts of any of the social  
30 scales that they have represented, but the research that has produced ethnographies  
31 has been undertaken with satisfactory (or satisfying) imaginaries of the broader  
32 social systemic contexts in which it operates (even doctrines of “partial knowledge”  
33 provide, by deferred imagination, this systemic context for the intimate scale of  
34 ethnography [see Otto and Bubandt 2011]). How to evoke and understand broader  
35 scales in ethnographic research projects became more problematic during the  
36 1990s—not so much in the rhetoric of ethnographic writing but in the planning  
37 and doing of ethnographic research—with multiple discussions of “the global  
38 situation,” on the one hand, and, on the other hand, with the weighted shift from



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2 epistemological to ontological concerns in several important arenas of ethnographic  
3 research (e.g., sciences studies, political economy, development). With the failure  
4 or weakening of holistic systems rhetorics that assist the defining of sites or circuits  
5 of ethnographic research, incompleteness becomes a methodological postulate,  
6 even a theorem. How a project in its intensive doing is incomplete not only  
7 becomes an interesting question in itself but also a probe with which to establish  
8 paraethnographic connection with research subjects or counterparts who perhaps  
9 share an affinity with the ethnographer based on a dimension of variable speculation  
10 about agencies elsewhere, and an encompassing, contextualizing systemic scale  
11 (I once conceived these relations of research as based on complicity, rather than  
12 rapport [Marcus 1997]). In any case, a speculative imaginary of an ethnographic  
13 sort for how the everydayness of one's inquiry relates to the unseen everydayness  
14 of connected elsewheres becomes an important dimension of fieldwork that is  
15 motivated to create alternative forms to probe with others in the circuits of  
16 fieldwork this "theorem" of incompleteness within or alongside many ethnographic  
17 projects today.

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#### 19 **Five: The Temporality of Emergence**

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21 Working on and in the temporality of emergence, of the contemporary (as  
22 the just past and the near future) defines as much, if not more, the mise-en-scène of  
23 many ethnographic projects today than the traditional distinctive space or site, with  
24 a definable past and a captured present. The present becoming the near future at  
25 least shapes a common orientation of ethnographer and her subjects, and provides  
26 the negotiable basis of mutual concept work—a shared, baseline imaginary for  
27 it—on which the collaborative experiments with form that I am evoking depend.  
28 Orientation to the emergent present thus produces the aesthetic satisfaction of  
29 surprise that in part drives ethnographic inquiry, but also connects with the parallel  
30 aesthetics found among the intellectually more active of ethnography's subjects, as  
31 interlocutors and epistemic partners in research.

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32 Kim Fortun in her article for this issue conceives of this distinctive temporality  
of ethnographic research in the contemporary as the "future anterior":

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34 Ethnography . . . can be designed to bring forth a future anterior that is not  
35 calculable from what we now know, a future that surprises. Ethnography thus  
36 becomes creative, producing something that didn't exist before. Something  
37 beyond codified expert formulas. . . . The future is anteriorized when the past  
38 is folded into the way reality presents itself, setting up both the structures  
and the obligations of the future . . . . Toxics, like the future anterior, call on

2 us to think about determinism but without the straightforward directives of  
3 teleology. [this issue]

4 The temporality of emergence is thus a condition of the research situation and a  
5 feature of the material—the data, as such—that ethnography collects, but more  
6 significantly, it is a component of the ways of thinking and analysis that the ethno-  
7 grapher and her subjects try out on each other as fieldwork proceeds. Eventually,  
8 this temporality finds itself as a framing and analytic language in the writing of  
9 ethnographic texts, but much before that, it is a key dimension of the way concepts  
10 and thinking emerge collaboratively and speculatively in the field.  
11

### 12 **Six: The Appeal of Design and the Studio as a Legitimate Form of** 13 **Experimentation in Association with Fieldwork Projects**

14 Design practices have had great appeal in recent years across a number of  
15 practices in the human sciences that were reshaped by critical culture theories  
16 during the 1980s and 1990s, especially. Bruno Latour has attractively dubbed  
17 design as “the cautious prometheus” (2008)—evoking a kind of pragmatic, small-  
18 scaled ethos and plan for the critical scholar as researcher with activist inflection  
19 in an era of phlegmatic left–liberal political imaginaries. Design thus has within  
20 it associations with critique and critical practices, yet thrives in formal relation  
21 to markets and commerce. Optimistically, the appropriation of design methods,  
22 then, might give ethnography (to which designers have been drawn in their need  
23 to take users into account and in their own curiosities through “cultural probes”)  
24 the affordance of the “mole” in “third spaces.” This may be wishful thinking, but in  
25 terms of how fieldwork is conducted, it does offer the concept of the studio and  
26 its practices as a material means of experimenting with alternative forms within or  
27 alongside the serendipitous movements of ethnographers in fieldwork. The studio  
28 captures a micro public—or its representatives—evokes a scaled down commons,  
29 or creates a literal space for broad, speculative, and explicit theoretical thinking,  
30 and a culturally sensitive means to shape an unruly field or domain of research  
31 circulation. It can establish an authority for ethnographic inquiry, building on that  
32 existing for the design studio, where that of ethnography itself is more than usually  
33 constrained, or barely recognized.<sup>4</sup>  
34

### 35 **THIRD SPACES, AND SO FORTH . . .**

36 Michael Fischer influentially posited during the early 2000s that anthropology  
37 “now operates in a set of third spaces” in which “anthropology’s challenge is to  
38 develop translation and mediation tools for helping make visible the difference

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2 of interests, access, power, needs, desire, and philosophical perspective” (Fischer  
3 2003:3) He goes on to say that “these third spaces are terrains and topologies of  
4 analysis of cultural critique of ethical plateaus. They are dramaturgical processes,  
5 fields of action and deep plays of reason and emotion, compulsion and desire, mean-  
6 ing making and sensuality, paralogs and deep sense, social action and constraints  
7 of overpowering social forces” (Fischer 2003:4).

8 My sense of the course of many projects of ethnographic research roughly  
9 from the turn of the century forward are indeed operating in third spaces, but  
10 both of their own making and design, as well as in those “found” and posited. So,  
11 what are these third spaces literally, how have they been imagined, and sometimes  
12 literally produced, stage managed, or forged out of the circuits and serendipitous  
13 movements that fieldwork projects define? For third spaces to be found, must  
14 they to some degree not be produced, elicited, as domains of speculative thinking,  
15 alongside and increasingly defining of situations of fieldwork? What are the varieties  
16 of such moves and inventions? How are they conceived, and what do they portend  
17 for anthropological knowledge?

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#### EXEMPLARS . . .

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These questions have come to be the intellectual spine—the orienting  
themes—of the Center for Ethnography at UCI, with a curiosity about the many  
projects that were then self-consciously emerging at its inauguration (in 2005)  
and becoming established arenas of anthropological research endeavor amid the  
networks, assemblages, knowledge economies, and complex institutional arrange-  
ments of global orders that had been the prominent subjects of the influential  
“trend” writing in anthropology during the 1990s that I mentioned, and anthro-  
pology’s early forays into sciences studies, as well as fascinations with critiques of  
neoliberalism, flows, circuits, ethnographic multisitedness, and so forth. Immer-  
sive fieldwork certainly has remained the ideology of ethnographic research in these  
arenas, but its ultimate results, its developing ideas and arguments, are functions  
of different sorts of participations that pursue a line of thinking in the field, often  
collaborative and collective in nature, that requires not only documentation (in field  
notes and diaries, e.g., leading to the monograph) but also forms of elicitation,  
demonstration, and accessibility to publics and readerships in process. Thus, in  
contemporary ethnographic projects, prototypes—working versions anticipatory  
of a result—have become, in a sense, more important productions than finished  
and rounded interpretative texts. But these productions need their forms, their  
spaces, their studios, and media. It is the variety of such experiments in form that

2 the Center has sought to follow, encourage, to provide perspective on, and perhaps  
3 use to articulate the rudiments of a theory of such practices.

4 In terms of digital technology, the website, and its evolving capacities (e.g.,  
5 the development of content management systems, of text oriented websites, or  
6 blogs, like WordPress) to represent, communicate, and create opportunities for  
7 participation, has been the working medium for the development and communi-  
8 cation of alternative forms embedded in or alongside the research process. The  
9 capacity, knowledge, and resources to support digital forms for ethnography are  
10 another matter—and challenge. Yet, the following exemplars all make use of such  
11 technology at different levels and stages of commitment. Overall, they provide the  
12 means of continuing access during the life of a research project to experiments with  
13 the ethnographic form whether they are performed through such technology (as in  
14 some experiments in dynamic archiving) or through active staged interventions and  
15 studio events alongside fieldwork for which digital technology provides a means of  
16 continual reporting and engagement in relation to its granular, built publics along  
17 the way. What such forms, technologically assisted or not, provide access to is  
18 not so much data but the analytics and thinking of a research project in progress.  
19 They certainly do not trump as yet the conventional ethnographic text or book.  
20 Rather, at this juncture, they can provide an enframing ecology for it. But, as both  
21 the performed events as forms and the technologies for discursive access to them  
22 develop, they do promise to be more than just supplementary to, or enframing of,  
23 the classic modes of writing culture.

24 In the spirit and limits of this article as a sketch, I merely categorize, with brief  
25 descriptions and annotations, a sample of the projects that I have been following.  
26 I cite their own self-presenting websites and statements for consultation by the  
27 reader as a means of following them in their devised modes of anthropological  
28 scholarship that develop continuously and alongside the broader and encompassing  
29 projects and knowledge economies through which they constitute their research as  
30 fieldwork under the range of contemporary conditions that I described.

### 31 32 **I. DYNAMIC ARCHIVING . . .**

33 Rather than mere repositories of data or accumulated scholarship, archives  
34 in the mode of ethnographic experimentation are active, animated, open-ended,  
35 multileveled, and transitive in authorings, genres, publics, commons, and internal  
36 relations, monitoring the shifting conditions of producing ethnographic research  
37 today. They are the most fully alternative among the exemplars that I am surveying  
38 to the authoritative print genres of scholarly communication. Their conventional

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2 success depends on resources, investments, and patronage of the technologies  
3 through which they are created. In this way, they are perhaps no different historically  
4 than, say, encyclopedias and cabinets of curiosity when they were in fashion.  
5 From the many such projects underway today morphing conventional disciplinary  
6 practices,<sup>5</sup> I select out Mike and Kim Fortuns' Asthma Files project to exhibit.  
7 Asthma Files is a work in progress that both illustrates the considerable hurdles  
8 in actually producing a platform true to the project's considerable ambitions and  
9 vision, as well as providing a continuing in-depth conceptual, theoretical, and  
10 normative discussion of the project's imaginaries rooted in the ethnographic stuff  
11 of the world (see Asthma Files n.d.; Fortun 2011b).

12 In such projects, not just technological possibility but also curatorial practices  
13 become key to the construction, maintenance, and arguments-within-form of  
14 dynamic archiving, as contemporary "writing culture."<sup>6</sup>

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## 16 II. STUDIOS, LABS, PARA-SITES . . .

17 Studios and labs established in relation to particular fieldwork projects, col-  
18 lectively or individually pursued, have different durations, compositions, and in-  
19 tellectual styles.

20 They are often influenced by the working practices of a variety of design  
21 disciplines (e.g., architecture, graphics, product design, or design modalities in  
22 informatics and computer science, or theater arts and art-making movements like  
23 conceptual, performance, and installation art) or natural sciences that combine lab  
24 work with fieldwork.

25 A lab model is the Anthropological Research on the Contemporary ([ARC];  
26 consult anthropos-lab.net), begun in the mid-2000s at Berkeley, and that has gone  
27 through a number of changes (see Rabinow 2011). It has evolved a distinctive sense  
28 of how collective labwork should develop alongside ongoing ethnographic research  
29 projects (the function of "concept work" that it defines for itself), and there are  
30 some interesting debates early in its history, and archived on its website, about  
31 alternative ways a lab or studio initiative might relate to existing ways of thinking  
32 about the conduct of fieldwork (see also Marcus 2008). In its later iterations, ARC  
33 reports on specific studio events in relation to particular fieldwork projects in  
34 progress.

35 A studio model is the "para-site" developed from the mid-2000s as well at  
36 the Center for Ethnography at UCI as a modality available to "first fieldwork"  
37 projects of dissertation research in progress that provides an opportunistic means  
38 of untying certain conceptual or relational "knots" that emerge during or after (in

2 the postdoc period) such pedagogically monitored research. The scenes for such  
3 events are carefully thought through, designed, and even staged, and depending on  
4 its problems, and its politics, so to speak, brings together different constituencies  
5 to the research, including those in the “field” (informants, subjects, members of its  
6 publics), and those not (e.g., supervising, mentoring professors, fellow students,  
7 relevant experts).

8 Although the “para-site” concept of studio events alongside or within fieldwork  
9 was thought through originally as a pedagogical modality,<sup>7</sup> it has migrated as well as  
10 an element of thinking about ethnographic projects in maturing careers. However,  
11 para-site, studio interventions were not meant to be part of the design or planning  
12 of fieldwork projects in their early stages but, rather, a resource or form in reserve,  
13 thought through as such and adapted to the conditions of doing ethnography today—  
14 especially with regard to both the imperative and impulse to collaborate, discussed  
15 previously. Para-sites are thus opportunistic, and meant to reduce the abstraction  
16 of the theoretical processing of ethnographic data, by pushing such processing into  
17 staged dialogic occasions of the ethnographic research process.<sup>8</sup>

### 18 19 III. PROJECTS WITHIN (OR ALONGSIDE) PROJECTS . . .

20 An important category of projects of contemporary ethnographic research that  
21 create conditions for the kind of experimentation with forms, like the studio, lab,  
22 staged or designed intervention, or curated archive that I have been discussing, are  
23 those that are embedded within, and usually funded and given assigned “space” by,  
24 much more powerful, often international, and cross-institutional projects. These  
25 are ethnographic research functions within the leviathan, so to speak, the new  
26 assemblages, arrangements, and animating ideas of governing orders. Actually,  
27 most ethnography today, no matter how local, occurs within or in relation to  
28 such regimes, the reflexive sides of which exercise increasing auditing scrutiny,  
29 itself of variable ethnographic interest (Strathern 2000) of what it sponsors. The  
30 condition of producing ethnography that gives rise to a critical function of the kind  
31 that *Writing Culture* promoted within the craft of producing ethnographic discourse  
32 (in its textual genre, but now, as I argue, in fieldwork) is that of the sort of  
33 “double-agency” that I mentioned. And these ethnographic projects within larger  
34 patron projects that negotiate different agendas epitomize this condition of double-  
35 agency and perform it, so to speak, in the alongside forms that it produces, spon-  
36 sors, or participates): conferences, studios, seminars, planning meetings, and so  
37 forth.  
38

1

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2 Two such projects that I have followed with fascination are the Institute  
3 for Money, Technology and Financial Inclusion (IMTFI; consult [http://www.  
4 imtfti.uci.edu/](http://www.imtfti.uci.edu/)), conceived and directed by my colleague at UCI, Bill Maurer, and  
5 funded as a project of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Paul Rabinow's  
6 term as director of the ELSI (Ethics, Law, Social Implication) component of a  
7 multiuniversity, NSF-funded initiative (SynBERC) to establish the emerging field  
8 of synthetic biology (see Rabinow 2011; Rabinow and Bennett in press; studio  
9 events in relation to this project are on the ARC website subsequent to Rabinow's  
10 controversial exiting of SynBERC). Together, they provide an interesting and re-  
11 vealing comparative probe into projects that align (and contest) the purposes of  
12 critical ethnographic inquiry with those of megaprojects that define space and a cer-  
13 tain domain of agency for the latter. Both projects define anthropological research  
14 and media as a contemporary legacy of writing culture within the clockwork of  
15 Weber's bureaucratic rationality, or of Foucault's governmentality. They exhibit  
16 both the subtleties and the more overt politics of so doing, as well as the alongside  
17 experiments with digital, conference, and workshop forms on which a sense of  
18 doing fieldwork while participating in the work of larger projects depends.

19

### Envoi

20

21 A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of  
22 fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and  
23 writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and  
24 thus provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect. It is,  
25 in a word, poetry—not in its textual form, but in its return to the original  
26 context and function of poetry, which by means of its performative break with  
27 everyday speech, evoked memories of the ethos of community and thereby  
28 provoked hearers to act ethically.

29

—Stephen A. Tyler *Post-Modern Ethnography*

30

[Fortun 2011a]

31

32

### ABSTRACT

33

34 *This article argues that the most lively contemporary legacy of the 1980s Writing  
35 Culture critiques now lie outside, or beyond, conventional texts but, rather, in the forms  
36 that are integral to fieldwork itself. Fieldwork today requires a kind of collaborative  
37 concept work that stimulates studios, archiving, para-sites, which in turn constitute  
38 the most innovative expressions of ethnography, difficult to capture in the traditional  
genre. [archives, collaboration, concept work, para-sites, studios]*

38

## 2 NOTES

- 3 1. I have thought of doing a sort of memoir—fanciful and with its comedic aspect—of the 80s  
4 forward in the form of select book cover endorsements such as these, and arranged to evoke  
5 certain relations of production and of reciprocity like this one . . . but more importantly to  
6 capture something of the style of post-*Writing Culture* vainglory. There would be something of  
7 value, I argue, in apprehending collectively a portrait of these selected short texts that would  
8 augur where we are now with problems of form in ethnographic research more broadly (rather  
9 than just in producing ethnography as texts).
- 10 2. The task of the Santa Fe seminar from which these essays emerged was to introduce a literary  
11 consciousness to ethnographic practice by showing various ways in which ethnographies can  
12 be read and written . . . The question for the anthropologist is, then, how consequential this  
13 literary therapy should be—does it merely add a new critical appreciation of ethnography,  
14 which one can take or leave in reading and writing ethnographic accounts, or does it clear the  
15 way for reconceptualizing anthropological careers and valorizing innovations in strategies for  
16 projects that link fieldwork and writing? [Marcus 1986:262]
- 17 3. As Marilyn Strathern has said, based on her own forays into complex big science projects, and  
18 redemptive of ethnography in those contexts: “Social anthropology has one trick up its sleeve:  
19 the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the investigator is aware of at the time  
20 of collection” (2004:6). This “more data,” this surplus of interpretation and insight—more  
21 than subjects, clients, or a broad public perhaps desire or understand—is often the “stuff”  
22 that defines the double-agency of fieldwork research. In the alternative, experimental forms  
23 emerging today, this “stuff” finds expression and articulations that can morph, travel, and  
24 gain constituencies within the operations of fieldwork and beyond. The inevitable position  
25 of double-agency today becomes, in studios, para-sites, lateral positionings, the basis for  
26 the composition of thinking forged in the field that can travel and articulate more broadly the “trick  
27 up anthropology’s sleeve.”
- 28 4. In evoking design as a kind of ground for the figure of innovation in the emergence of along-side  
29 practices, I have been cautioned about overenthusiasm for design practices (e.g., participatory  
30 design) and what they in fact do, by anthropologists such as Lucy Suchman (2011) and Melissa  
31 Cefkin (2010) who have made their careers in working in regimes of design process. Also, in  
32 evoking design as an inspiration, I have sometimes been misunderstood as being mainly interested  
33 in how ethnography can work within and aid design and studio projects—a relationship that  
34 has long been established (esp. in Scandinavia) and has continuing currency in a number of  
35 design fields like architecture, and especially informatics (see Dourish and Bell 2011). I am  
36 interested, rather, in what design thinking and process affords for projects of ethnographic  
37 research in its own terms and conceptions. I am interested, then, not in ethnography folded  
38 into design, but design folded into independently conceived projects of ethnography that often  
now develop collaborative commitments and modes of operation along the way. Design thinking  
inside ethnography anticipates perhaps such collaborations and provides spaces, framings, and  
a history of forms to develop them. Introducing design forms and thinking into or alongside  
fieldwork, still individualistic and naturalistic, in habit, stimulates trials of concept and value  
that otherwise await the process of “writing culture” in the conventional modes of scholarly  
production.
5. For example, the Matsutake Worlds Research group, whose website, matsutakeworlds.org,  
archives a continuing collaborative research endeavor that I have begun to follow as I have  
writing this article. It has evolved from the influential writing of Anna Tsing in the 1990s and  
2000s about doing ethnography in the “Global Situation,” to the formation of the Matsutake  
Worlds Research Group (2009) among her students and associates as a collaborative project in  
its archival form on line as ethnography in progress.
6. Here is a summary of the project by its creators, drawn from their website:

The Asthma Files is an experimental, digital ethnography project structured to support collaboration among distributed, diversely focused researchers, and outreach to



2 diverse audiences. . . . The Asthma Files operates on an open source platform that sup-  
3 ports both the research process, and rapid, creative sharing of research results. As the  
4 project matures, there will be active outreach to various audiences, including scient-  
5 ists, health care providers, journalists, policy makers and people with asthma. . . . The  
6 Asthma Files maintains a continually expanding and evolving list of reasons the project  
7 is important. This list, in the substantive logics drawer of the archive, keeps all in-  
8 volved mindful of the historical conditions in which we work, and of the challenge  
9 of linking academic research in the social sciences and humanities to contemporary  
10 social problems. The Asthma Files also maintains a continually evolving list of design  
11 logics that shape how the research is imagined, carried out and represented. These  
12 logics are drawn from social, literary, and aesthetic theory. Curating a list of de-  
13 sign logics allows theoretical ideas to animate without overdetermining The Asthma  
14 Files.—Mike and Kim Fortun [Asthma Files n.d.]

- 15 7. The ethnocharrette is another variant on the studio event, besides the para-site, that is being  
16 developed, by Keith Murphy and myself, at the Center for Ethnography at UCL, specifically  
17 as a pedagogical modality for thinking through and remaking published ethnographies as pro-  
18 totypes for other forms and formats. For reports on our first two ethnocharrettes, consult  
19 <http://ethnocharrette.wordpress.com/>.
- 20 8. Theatricality is an interesting source of stimulation in thinking about the conduct of para-sites,  
21 briefly explored in Deeb and Marcus 2010.

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